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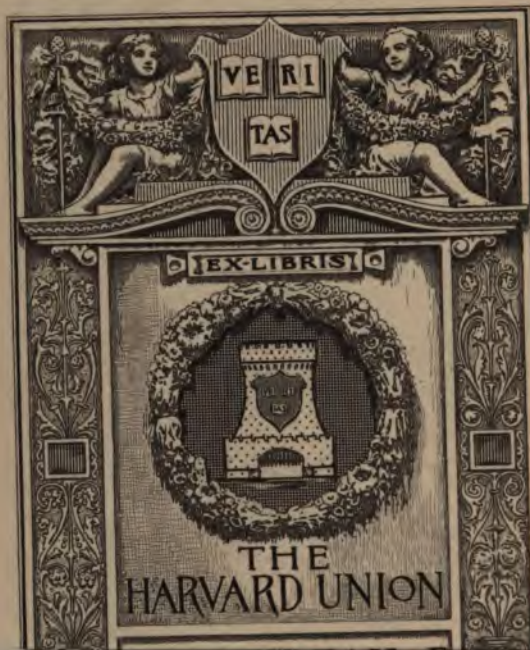
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THE PIER-GLASS

POEMS BY
ROBERT GRAVES

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Figure 1: A scatter plot showing the relationship between the number of children and the number of adults. The x-axis is labeled "Number of children" and the y-axis is labeled "Number of adults". The data points are: (0, 10), (1, 9), (2, 8), (3, 7), (4, 6), (5, 5), (6, 4), (7, 3), (8, 2), (9, 1), (10, 0).

THE PIER-GLASS

BOOKS BY

ROBERT GRAVES

FAIRIES AND FUSILIERS

COUNTRY SENTIMENT

THE PIER-GLASS

THE PIER-GLASS

BY
ROBERT GRAVES



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**TO
NANCY NICHOLSON**

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NOTE

MOST of the pieces here included have appeared serially in *The London Mercury*, *The Athenæum*, *The Spectator*, *The Nation*, *The New Statesman*, *To-day*, *The Century Magazine* and other periodicals, English and American.

ROBERT GRAVES.

**Boar's Hill.
Oxford.**

CONTENTS

- The Stake, 11**
The Troll's Nosegay, 13
The Pier-glass, 14
The Finding of Love, 17
Reproach, 20
The Magical Picture, 21
Distant Smoke, 25
Morning Phoenix, 28
Catherine Drury, 29
Raising the Stone, 30
The Treasure Box, 31
The Kiss, 33
Lost Love, 35
Fox's Dingle, 36
The Gnat, 38
The Patchwork Bonnet, 42
Kit Logan and Lady Helen, 44
Down, 46
Saul of Tarsus, 49
Storm: at the Farm Window, 50
Black Horse Lane, 51
Return, 53
Incubus, 55
The Hills of May, 57
The Coronation Murder, 58

THE STAKE

Naseboro' held him guilty,
Crowther took his part,
Who lies at the cross-roads,
A stake through his heart.

Spring calls, and the stake answers
Throwing out shoots;
The towns debate what life is this
Sprung from such roots.

Naseboro' says "A Upas Tree";
"A Rose," says Crowther;
But April's here to declare it
Neither one nor other.

Neither ill nor very fair,
Rose nor Upas,
But an honest oak-tree,
As its parent was.

A green-tufted oak-tree
On the green wold,
Careless as the dead heart
That the roots enfold.

THE TROLL'S NOSEGAY

A simple nosegay! was that much to ask?
(Winter still gloomed, with scarce a bud yet
showing).

He loved her ill, if he resigned the task.

“Somewhere,” she cried, “there *must* be
blossom blowing.”

It seems my lady wept and the troll swore

By Heaven he hated tears: he'd cure her
spleen;

Where she had begged one flower, he'd shower
fourscore,

A haystack bunch to amaze a China Queen.

Cold fog-drawn Lily, pale mist-magic Rose

He conjured, and in a glassy cauldron set

With elvish unsubstantial Mignonette

And such vague bloom as wandering dreams
enclose.

But she?

Awed,

Charmed to tears,

Distracted,

Yet—

Even yet, perhaps, a trifle piqued— who knows?

THE PIER-GLASS

(To T. E. Lawrence, who helped me with it)
Lost manor where I walk continually
A ghost, while yet in woman's flesh and blood.
Up your broad stairs mounting with outspread
fingers
And gliding steadfast down your corridors
I come by nightly custom to this room,
And even on sultry afternoons I come
Drawn by a thread of time-sunk memory.

Empty, unless for a huge bed of state
Shrouded with rusty curtains drooped awry
(A puppet theatre where malignant fancy
Peoples the wings with fear). At my right
hand
A ravelled bell-pull hangs in readiness
To summon me from attic glooms above
Service of elder ghosts; here at my left
A sullen pier-glass cracked from side to side
Scorns to present the face as do new mirrors
With a lying flush, but shows it melancholy
And pale, as faces grow that look in mirrors.

Is here no life, nothing but the thin shadow
And blank foreboding, never a wainscote rat
Rasping a crust? Or at the window pane
No fly, no bluebottle, no starveling spider?
The windows frame a prospect of cold skies
Half-merged with sea, as at the first creation,
Abstract, confusing welter. Face about,
Peer rather in the glass once more, take note
Of self, the grey lips and long hair dishevelled,
Sleep-staring eyes. Ah, mirror, for Christ's love
Give me one token that there still abides
Remote, beyond this island mystery
So be it only this side Hope, somewhere,
In streams, on sun-warm mountain pasturage,
True life, natural breath; not this phantasma.

A rumour, scarcely yet to be reckoned sound,
But a pulse quicker or slower, then I know
My plea is granted; death prevails not yet.
For bees have swarmed behind in a close place
Pent up between this glass and the outer wall.
The combs are founded, the queen rules her court,
Bee-serjeants posted at the entrance chink
Are sampling each returning honey-cargo
With scrutinizing mouth and commentary,
Slow approbation, quick dissatisfaction.

Disquieting rhythm, that leads me home at last
From labyrinthine wandering. This new mood
Of judgment orders me my present duty,
To face again a problem strongly solved
In life gone by, but now again proposed
Out of due time for fresh deliberation.
Did not my answer please the Master's ear?
Yet, I'll stay obstinate. How went the question,
A paltry question set on the elements
Of love and the wronged lover's obligation;
Kill or forgive? Still does the bed ooze blood?
Let it drip down till every floor-plank rot!
Yet shall I answer, challenging the judgment:—
*“Kill, strike the blow again, spite what shall
come.”*
“Kill, strike, again, again,” the bees in chorus
hum.

THE FINDING OF LOVE

Before this generous time
Of Love in morning prime,
He had long season stood
Bound in a nightmare mood
Of dense murk, rarely lit
By Jack-o'-Lantern's flit
And straightway smothered spark
Of beasts' eyes in the dark,
Mourning with sense adrift,
Tears rolling swift.

With o, for Sun to blaze
Drying the cobweb-maze
Dew-sagged upon the corn,
With o, for flowering thorn,
For fly and butterfly,
For pigeons in the sky,
For robin and thrush,
For the long bulrush,
For cherry under the leaf,
For an end to grief,
For joy in steadfastness.
Then through his distress
And clouded vision came
An unknown gradual flame

By silent hands controlled,
Pale at first and cold,
Like wizard's lily-bloom
Conjured from the gloom,
Like torch of glow-worm seen
Through grasses shining green
By children half in fright,
Or Christmas candlelight
Flung on the outer snow,
Or tinsel stars that show
Their evening glory
With sheen of fairy story.

No more, no more,
Forget that went before!
Not a wrack remains
Of all his former pains.
Here's Love a drench of light,
A Sun dazzling the sight,
Well started on his race
Towards the Zenith space
Where fixed and sure
He shall endure,
Holding peace secure.

Now with his blaze
He dries the cobweb maze
Dew-sagging on the corn,
He brings the flowering thorn,
The fly and butterfly,
And pigeons in the sky,
The robin and the thrush,
And the long bulrush,
And cherry under the leaf,
Earth in a silken dress,
With end to grief,
With love in steadfastness.

REPROACH

Your grieving moonlight face looks down
Through the forest of my fears,
Crowned with a spiny bramble-crown,
Dew-dropped with evening tears.

Why do you spell "untrue, unkind,"
Reproachful eyes plaguing my sleep?
I am not guilty in my mind
Of aught would make you weep.

Untrue? but how, what broken oath?
Unkind? I know not even your name.
Unkind, untrue, you charge me both,
Scalding my heart with shame.

The black trees shudder, dropping snow,
The stars tumble and spin.
Speak speak, or how may a child know
His ancestral sin?

THE MAGICAL PICTURE

Glinting on the roadway
A broken mirror lay:
Then what did the child say
 Who found it there?
He cried there was a goblin
Looking out as he looked in—
Wild eyes and speckled skin,
Black, bristling hair!

He brought it to his father
Who being a simple sailor
Swore, "This is a true wonder,
 Deny it who can!
Plain enough to me, for one,
 It's a portrait aptly done
Of Admiral, the great Lord Nelson
 When a young man."

The sailor's wife perceiving
Her husband had some pretty thing
At which he was peering,
 Seized it from his hand.
Then tears started and ran free,
"Jack, you have deceived me,

I love you no more," said she,

"So understand!"

"But Mary," says the sailor,

"This is a famous treasure,

Admiral Nelson's picture

Taken in youth."

"Viper and fox," she cries,

"To trick me with such lies,

Who is this wench with the bold eyes?

Tell me the truth!"

Up rides the parish priest

Mounted on a fat beast.

Grief and anger have not ceased

Between those two;

Little Tom still weeps for fear;

He has seen Hobgoblin, near,

Great white teeth and fowl leer

That pierced him through.

Now the old priest lifts his glove

Bidding all for God's love

To stand and not to move,

Lest blood be shed.

"O, O!" cries the urchin,

[22]

"I saw the devil grin,
He glared out, as I looked in;
A true death's head!"

Mary weeps, "Ah, Father,
My Jack loves another!
On some voyage he courted her
In a land afar."
This, with cursing, Jack denies:—
"Father, use your own eyes:
It is Lord Nelson in disguise
As a young tar."

When the priest took the glass,
Fresh marvels came to pass
"A saint of glory, by the Mass!
Where got you this?"
He signed him with the good Sign,
Be sure the relic was divine,
He would fix it in a shrine
For pilgrims to kiss.

There the chapel folks who come
(Honest, some, and lewd, some),
See the saint's eyes and are dumb,
Kneeling on the flags.

Some see the Doubter Thomas,
And some Nathaniel in the glass,
And others whom but old Saint Judas
 With his money bags?

DISTANT SMOKE

Seth and the sons of Seth who followed him
Halted in silence: labour, then, was vain.
Fast at the zenith, blazoned in his splendour,
Hung the fierce Sun, wherefore these travelling
folk
Stood centered each in his own disc of shade.
The term proposed was ended; now to enjoy
The moment's melancholy; their tears fell
shining.

Yesterday early at the dreadful hour,
When life ebbs lowest, when the strand of being
Is slowly bared until discovered show
Weed-mantelled hulks that foundered years ago
At autumn anchorage, then father Adam
Summoned in haste his elder generations
To his death-tent, and gasping spoke to them,
Forthwith defining an immediate journey
Beyond the eastern ridge, in quest for one
Whom he named Cain, brother to Seth, true
uncle
To these young spearmen; they should lead him
here
For a last benediction at his hands.

First-born yet outlawed! Scarcely they believed
In this strange word of "Cain," in this new man,
Man, yet outside the tents; but Adam swore
And gave them a fair sign of recognition.
There was a brand, he said, a firm red pillar
Parting Cain's brows, and Cain had mighty hands,
Sprouting luxurious hair, red, like his beard.
Moreover Adam said that by huge strength
Himself could stay this ebb of early morning,
Yet three days longer, three days, though no
more —

This for the stern desire and long disquietude
That was his love for Cain; whom God had
cursed.

Then would he kiss all fatherly and so die —
Kneeling, with eyes abased, they made him
promise,

Swore, at the midpoint of their second day,
If unsped in the search of whom he named,
They would come hastening home to Adam's tent.
They touched his bony fingers; forth they went.

Now Seth, shielding his eyes, sees mistily
Breaking the horizon thirty miles away
(A full day's journey) what but a wisp, a feather,

A thin line, half a nothing—distant smoke!
Blown smoke, a signal from that utmost ridge
Of desolation—the camp fire of Cain.
He to restrain his twelve impetuous sons
(He knows the razor-edge of their young spirit)
Dissembles seeing, turns his steps about,
Bids them come follow, but they little heeding,
Scarce noting his commands, fasten their eyes
On smoke, so forfeit Adam's benediction,
Striding forward into the wilderness
With eager thighs, forgetful of their oath,
Adventurous for this monster, a new man,
Their own kin—how accursed?—they haste
for wonder.

1

MORNING PHOENIX

In my body lives a flame,
Flame that burns me all the day,
When a fierce sun does the same,
I am charred away.

Who could keep a smiling wit,
Roasted so in heart and hide,
Turning on the sun's red spit,
Scorched by love inside?

Caves I long for and cold rocks,
Minnow-peopled country brooks,
Blundering gales of Equinox,
Sunless valley-nooks.

Daily so I might restore
Calcined heart and shrivelled skin,
A morning phoenix with proud roar
Kindled new within.

CATHERINE DRURY

Mother

Edward will not taste his food,
Nor touch his drink,
Flings me answers gruff and rude:
Why, I dare not think.

Sister

Mother, do not try to know
All that moves in Edward's heart,
The fiery gloom he will not show;
You and he who lay so near
Fall wide apart.
Watch your rival, mother dear:
Catherine Drury does not guess
His dark love or your envious fear,
Her own loveliness.
She will laugh, she will play,
Never know the hurt she does:
Edward's heart will melt away,
His head go buzz,
And if he thinks you read his mind,
Better you had been struck stone blind.

RAISING THE STONE

A shaft of moon from the cloud-hurried sky,
Has coursed the wide dark heath, but nowhere
found

One paler patch to illumine — oats nor rye,
Chalk-pit nor waterpool nor sandy ground —
Till, checked by our thronged faces on the
mound

(A wedge of whiteness) universally
Strained backward from the task that holds us
bound,

It beams on set jaw and hate-maddened eye.

The vast stone lifts, turns, topples, in its fall
Spreads death: but we who live raise a shrill
chant

Of joy for sacrifice cleansing us all.

Once more we heave. Erect in earth we plant,
The interpreter of our dumb furious call,

Outraging Heaven, pointing

“ I want, I want.”

THE TREASURE BOX

Ann in chill moonlight unlocks
Her polished brassbound treasure-box,
Draws a soft breath, prepares to spread
The toys around her on the bed.
She dips for luck: by luck pulls out
A silver pig with ring in snout,
The sort that Christmas puddings yield;
Next comes a painted nursery shield
Boy-carved; and then two yellow gloves,
A Limerick wonder that Ann loves,
Leather so thin and joined so well
The pair fold in a walnut shell;
Here's patchwork that her sister made
With antique silk and flower brocade,
Small faded scraps in memory rich
Joined each to each with feather-stitch;
Here's cherry and forget-me-not
Ribbon bunched in a great knot;
A satin purse with pansies on it;
A Tudor baby's christening bonnet;
Old Mechlin lace minutely knit
(Some woman's eyes went blind for it);
And Spanish broideries that pinch
Three blossomed rosetrees to one inch;

Here are Ann's brooches, simple pins,
A Comet brooch, two Harlequins,
A Posy; here's a great resplendent
Dove-in-bush Italian pendant;
A Chelsea gift-bird; a toy whistle;
A halfpenny stamped with the Scots thistle;
Breguet watch; a coral string;
Her mother's thin-worn wedding ring;
A straw box full of hard smooth sweets;
A book, the *Poems of John Keats*;
A chessman; a pink paper rose;
A diary dwindling to its close
Nine months ago; a worsted ball;
A patchbox; a stray match — that's all,
All but a few small treasure scraps
Of paper; things forbid perhaps —
See how slowly Ann unties
The packet where her heartache lies;
Watch her lips move; she slants a letter
Up towards the moon to read it better,
(The moon may master what he can).
R stands for Richard, A for Ann
And L . . . at this the old moon blinks
And softly from the window shrinks.

THE KISS

Are you shaken, are you stirred
By a whisper of love,
Spellbound to a word
Does Time cease to move,
Till her calm grey eye
Expands to a sky
And the clouds of her hair
Like storms go by?

Then the lips that you have kissed
Turn to frost and fire,
And a white-steaming mist
Obscures desire:
So back to their birth
Fade water, air, earth,
And the First Power moves
Over void and death.

Is that Love? no, but Death,
A passion, a shout,
The deep in-breath,
The breath roaring out,
And once that is flown,

**You must lie alone,
Without hope, without life,
Poor flesh, sad bone.**

LOST LOVE

His eyes are quickened so with grief,
He can watch a grass or leaf
Every instant grow; he can
Clearly through a flint wall see,
Or watch the startled spirit flee
From the throat of a dead man.
Across two counties he can hear,
And catch your words before you speak.
The woodlouse or the maggot's weak
Clamour rings in his sad ear;
And noise so slight it would surpass
Credence:—drinking sound of grass,
Worm talk, clashing jaws of moth
Chumbling holes in cloth:
The groan of ants who undertake
Gigantic loads for honour's sake,
Their sinews creak, their breath comes thin:
Whir of spiders when they spin,
And minute whispering, mumbling, sighs
Of idle grubs and flies.
This man is quickened so with grief,
He wanders god-like or like thief
Inside and out, below, above,
Without relief seeking lost love.

FOX'S DINGLE

Take now a country mood,
Resolve, distil it:—
Nine Acre swaying alive,
June flowers that fill it,

Spicy sweet-briar bush,
The uneasy wren
Fluttering from ash to birch
And back again,

Milkwort on its low stem,
Spread hawthorn tree,
Sunlight patching the wood,
A hive-bound bee. . . .

Girls riding nim-nim-nim,
Ladies, trot-trot,
Gentlemen hard at gallop,
Shouting, steam-hot.

Now over the rough turf
Bridles go jingle,
And there's a well loved pool,
By Fox's Dingle,

Where Sweetheart, my brown mare,
Old Glory's daughter,
May loll her leathern tongue
In snow-cool water.

THE GNAT

The shepherd Watkin heard an inner voice
Calling "My creature, ho! be warned, be ready!"
Calling, "The moment comes, therefore be
ready!"

And a third time calling, "Creature, be ready!"

This old poor man mistook the call, which
sounded

Not to himself, but to his pensioner.

For (truth or fantasy) the shepherd nourished

Fast in his brain, due earnings of transgression,

A creature like to that avenging fly

Once crept unseen in at King Herod's ear,

Tunnelling gradually inwards, upwards,

Heading for flowery pastures of the brain,

And battened on such grand, presumptuous fare

As grew him brazen claws and brazen hair

And wings of iron mail. Old Watkin felt

A like intruder channelling to and fro.

He cursed his day and sin done in past years,

Repentance choked, pride that outlawed his
heart,

So that at night often in thunderous weather

Racked with pain he'd start

From sleep, incontinently howling, leaping,
Striking his hoar head on the cottage walls,
Stamping his feet, dragging his hair by the roots.
He'd rouse the Gnat to anger, send it buzzing
Like a hugh mill, scraping with metal claws
At his midpoint of being; forthwith tumble
With a great cry for Death to stoop and end him.

Now Watkin hears the voice and weeps for bliss,
The voice that warned "Creature, the time is
come."

Merciful Death, was it Death, all his desire?
Promised of Heaven, and speedy? O Death,
come!

Only for one thought must he make provision,
For honest Prinny, for old bob-tail Prinny.
Another master? Where? These hillside
crofters

Were spiteful to their beasts and mercenary.
Prinny to such? No, Prinny too must die.
By his own hand, then? Murder! By what
other?

No human hand should touch the sacrifice,
No human hand;
God's hand then, through his temporal minister.

Three times has Watkin in the morning early
When not a soul was rising, left his flock,
Come to the Minister's house through the cold
mist,
Clicked at the latch and slowly moved the gate,
Faltered, held back and dared not enter in.
"Not this time, Prinny, we'll not rouse them yet,
To-morrow, surely, for our death is tokened,
My death and your death with small interval.
We meet in fields beyond; be sure of it, Prinny!"

On the next night
The busy Gnat, swollen to giant size,
Pent-up within the skull, knew certainly,
As a bird knows in the egg, his hour was come.
The thrice repeated call had given him
summons . . .
He must out, crack the shell, out, out!
He strains, claps his wings, arches his back,
Drives in his talons, out! out!
In the white anguish of this travail, Watkin
Hurls off his blankets, tears an axe from the nail
Batters the bed, hews table, splits the floor,
Hears Prinny whine at his feet, leaps, strikes
again,

Strikes, yammering.

At that instant with a clatter
Noise of a bursting dam, a toppling wall,
Out flies the new-born creature from his mouth
And humming fearsomely like a huge engine,
Rackets about the room, smites the unseen
Glass of half-open windows, reels, recovers,
Soars out into the meadows, and is gone.

Silence prolonged to an age. Watkin still lives?
The hour of travail by the voice foretold
Brought no last throbbings of the dying Body
In child-birth of the Soul. Watkin still lives.

Labourer Watkin delves in the wet fields.
Did an old shepherd die that night with Prinny,
Die weeping with his head on the outraged
corpse?
Oh, he's forgotten. A dead dream, a cloud.
Labourer Watkin delves, drowsily, numbly,
His harsh spade grates among the buried stones.

THE PATCHWORK BONNET

Across the room my silent love I throw,
 Where you sit sewing in bed by candlelight,
 Your young stern profile and industrious
 fingers
Displayed against the blind in a shadow show,
 To Dinda's grave delight.

The needle dips and pokes, the cheerful thread
 Runs after, follow-my-leader down the seam:
 The patchwork pieces cry for joy together,
O soon to sit as a crown on Dinda's head,
 Fulfilment of their dream.

Snippets and odd ends folded by, forgotten,
 With camphor on the top shelf, hard to find,
 Now wake to this most happy resurrection,
To Dinda playing toss with a reel of cotton
 And staring at the blind.

Dinda in sing-song stretching out one hand
 Calls for the playthings; mother does not hear:
 Her mind sails far away on a patchwork
 Ocean,

And all the world must wait till she touches land,
So Dinda cries in fear,

Then Mother turns, laughing like a young fairy,
And Dinda smiles to see her look so kind,
Calls out again for playthings, playthings,
playthings,
And now the shadows make an Umbrian "*Mary
Adoring*," on the blind.

KIT LOGAN AND LADY HELEN

Here is Kit Logan with her love-child come
To Lady Helen's gate:
Then down sweeps Helen from the Italian room,
She with her child of hate.

Kit's boy was born of violent hot desire,
Helen's of hate and dread:
Poor girl, betrayed to union with the Squire,
Loathing her marriage bed.

Kit Logan, who is father to your boy?
But Helen knows, too well:
Listen what biting taunts they both employ,
Watch their red anger swell.

Yet each would give her undying soul to be
Changed to the other's place.
Kit from the wet road's tasking cruelty
Looks up to silk and lace,

Helen looks down at rags, her fluttering pride
Caught in this cage of glass,
Eager to trudge, thief, beg by the road-side,
Or starving to eat grass . . .

Silence. Wrath dies. For Woman's old good
name
Each swears a sister's oath;
Weeping, they kiss; to the Squire's lasting shame,
Who broke the heart in both.

DOWN

Downstairs a clock had chimed, two o'clock only.
Then outside from the hen-roost crowing came,
But why should Shift-wing call against the clock,
Three hours from dawn? The shutters click
and knock,

And he remembers a sad superstition
Unfitting for the sick-bed—Turn aside,
Distract, divide, ponder the simple tales
That puzzled childhood; riddles, turn them over,
Half-riddles, answerless, the more intense!—
Lost bars of music tinkling with no sense
Recur, drowning uneasy superstition.

Mouth open, he was lying, this sick man,
And sinking all the while; how had he come
To sink? On better nights his dream went
flying,
Dipping, sailing the pastures of his sleep,
But now since clock and cock, had sunk him
down
Through mattress, bed, floor, floors beneath,
stairs, cellars,
Through deep foundations of the manse; still
sinking

Through unturned earth. How had he cheated
space
With inadvertent motion or word uttered
Of too-close-packed intelligence (such there are)
That he should penetrate with sliding ease,
Dense earth, compound of ages, granite ribs
And groins? Consider, there was some word
uttered,
Some abracadabra—then like a stage-ghost,
Funereally with weeping, down, drowned, lost!

Oh, to be a child once more, sprawling at ease,
On warm turf of a ruined castle court.
Once he had dropped a stone between flat slabs
That mask the ancient well, mysteriously
Plunging his mind down with it. Hear it go
Rattling and rocketing down in secret void.
Count slowly one, two, three! and echoes rise
Fainter and fainter, merged in the gradual hum
Of bees and flies; only a thin draught rises
To chill the drowsy air; he for a while
Lay without spirit; until that floated back
From the deep waters. Oh, to renew now
The bliss of repossession, kindly sun
Forfeit for ever, and the scent of thyme!

Falling, falling! Light closed up behind him,
Now stunned by the violent subterrene flow
Of rivers, whirling down to hiss below
On the flame-axis of this terrible world;
Toppling upon their water-fall, O spirit . . .

SAUL OF TARSUS

“Share and share alike
In the nest” was the rule
But Paul had a wide throat,
He loved his belly-full.

Over the edge went Peter,
After him went John,
True-blooded young nestlings
Thrown out one by one.

If Mother Church was proud
Of her great cuckoo son,
He bit off her simple head
Before he had done.

STORM: AT THE FARM WINDOW

The unruly member (for relief
Of aching head) clacks without care;
Pastures lie sullen; hung with grief
The steading: thunder binds the air.

Gulls on the blue sea-surface rock:
The cows move lowing to scant shade;
Jess lays aside the half-worked smock,
Dan, in his ditch, lets fall the spade.

* * * * *

Now swoops the outrageous hurricane
With lightning in steep pitchfork jags;
The blanched hill leaps in sheeted rain,
Sea masses white to assault the crags.

Such menace tottering overhead,
Old Jess for ague scolds no more;
She sees grey bobtail flung down dead
Lightning-blazed by the barn door—

Wonder and panic chase our grief,
Purge our thick distempered blood;
Man, cattle, harvest shock and sheaf,
Stagger below the sluicing flood. . . .

BLACK HORSE LANE

Dame Jane the music mistress,
 the music mistress;
Sharkie the baker of Black Horse Lane,
 At sound of a fiddle
 Caught her up by the middle—
And away like swallows from the lane,
 Flying out together—
 From the crooked lane.

What words said Sharkie to her,
 said Sharkie to her?
How did she look in the lane?
 No neighbour heard
 One sigh or one word,
Not a sound but the fiddling in Black Horse
 Lane,
 The happy noise of music—
 Again and again.

Where now be those two old 'uns,
 be those two old 'uns,
Sharkie the baker run off with Jane?
 Hark ye up to Flint Street,
 Halloo to Pepper-Mint Street,

Follow by the fells to the great North Plain,
By the fells and the river—
To the cold North Plain.

How came this passion to them,
this passion to them,
Love in a freshet on Black Horse Lane?
It came without warning
One blue windy morning
So they scarcely might know was it joy or pain,
With scarce breath to wonder—
Was it joy or pain.

Took they no fardels with them,
no fardels with them,
Out and alone on the ice-bound plain?
Sharkie he had rockets
And crackers in his pockets,
Ay, and she had a plaid shawl to keep off the
rain,
An old Highland plaid shawl—
To keep off the rain.

RETURN

The seven years' curse is ended now
That drove me forth from this kind land,
From mulberry-bough and apple bough
And gummy twigs the west-wind shakes,
To drink the brine from crusted lakes
And grit my teeth on sand.

The load that from my shoulder slips
Straightway upon your own is tied;
You, too, shall scorch your finger-tips,
With scrabbling on the desert's face
Such thoughts I had for this green place,
Sent scapegoat for your pride.

Now for your cold, malicious brain
And most uncharitable, cold heart,
You, too, shall clank the seven years' chain
On sterile ground for all time curst
With famine's itch and flames of thirst,
The blank sky's counterpart.

Here, Robin on the tussock sits,
And Cuckoo with his call of hope
Cuckoos awhile, then off he flits,

While peals of dingle-dongle keep
Troop discipline among the sheep
That graze across the slope.

A brook from fields of gentle sun,
Through the glade his water heaves,
The falling cone would well-nigh stun
That squirrel wantonly lets drop,
When up he scampers to tree-top,
And dives among the green.

Yet, no, I ask a wider peace
Than peace your heart could comprehend,
More ample than my own release;
Go, be you loosed from your right fate,
Go with forgiveness and no hate;
Here let the story end.

INCUBUS

Asleep, amazed, with lolling head,
Arms in supplication spread,
Body shudders, dumb with fear;
There lifts the Moon, but who am I,
Cloaked in shadow wavering by,
Stooping, muttering at his ear?
Bound in Body, foot and hand,
Bound to lie at my command,
Horror bolted to lie still
While I sap what sense I will.

Through the darkness here come I,
Softly fold about the prey;
Body moaning must obey,
Must not question who or why,
Must accept me, come what may,
Dumbly must obey.

When owls and cocks dispute the dawn,
Through the window I am drawn
Streaming out, a foggy breath.
. . . Body wakens with a sigh
From the spell that was half Death,
Smiles for freedom, blinks an eye

At the sun-commanded sky,
“O morning scent and treetop song,
Slow-rising smoke and nothing wrong!”

THE HILLS OF MAY

Walking with a virgin heart
The green hills of May,
Me, the Wind, she took as lover
By her side to play.

Let me toss her untied hair,
Let me shake her gown,
Careless though the daisies redden,
Though the sun frown.

Scorning in her gay courage
Lesser love than this,
My cool spiritual embracing,
My gentle kiss.

So she walked, the proud lady,
So danced or ran,
So she loved with a calm heart,
Neglecting man. . . .

Fade, fail, innocent stars
On the green of May;
She has left our bournes for ever,
Too fine to stay.

THE CORONATION MURDER

IN FOUR PARTS

“Fairplay’s good sport, and we’re all mortal worms.”—MRS. DELILAH BECKER.

I

*Blessed above all women
Shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be*
Jael, a queen in Heaven
Surely will speak out straight in defence of me.

Shall I despair Salvation?
Was Sisera then more ripe for the knife or nail
Than rat-soul’d Becker? Do I misread the
tale?

I was no stealthy serpent.
(Jael flattered and killed her man as he slept.)
I was a lion, I challenged before I leapt.

Three times I gave clear warning
(Fair-play’s good sport), then standing I struck
him dead.

Ram-faced lecher, the blood on his own beast
head.

Blessed above all women
Shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be.
Ah, she won fame for her triumph,
My inward joy was payment enough for me.

II

Old Becker crawling in the night
From his grave at the stair-foot,
Labours up the long flight,
Feeble, dribbling, black as soot,
Quakes at his own ghostly fright.

A cat goes past with lantern eyes
Shooting splendour through the dark.
Murder! Help! a voice cries
In nightmare; the son dreams that stark
In lead his vanished father lies.

A stair-top glimmer points the goal.
Becker goes wavering up, tongue-tied,
Stoops, with eye to keyhole. . . .

There, a tall candle by her side,
Delilah sits, serene and whole.

Her fingers turn the prayer-book leaves,
Her forehead hints no mental strife:
Soft and calm her breast heaves:

So calmly, with his cobbling knife
She stabbed him through . . . now never
grieves.

Baffled, aghast with hate, mouse-poor,
He glares and clatters the brass knob . . .
Through his heart it slid sure:

He bowed, he died with never a sob,
Again she stabbed, now sits secure.

Praying as she has always prayed
For great Victoria's Majesty,
Droning prayer for God's aid
To succour long dead Royalty,
The Consort Prince, Queen Adelaide. . . .

She falls asleep, the clocks chime two;
Old Becker sinks to unquiet rest.
Loud and sad the cats mew:
Lead weighs cruelly on his breast:
His bones are tufted with mildew.

III

What's that, who's that comes breaking on my
sleep
With groans? What, father, you? (The
very look,
The same smudged foolish face like an old
sheep
Even after twenty years scarcely mistook.)

Speak, Father, speak; that night what came to
you
Vanished in wrath or terror? Tell the tale;
Your beer left still in mug, your half-made
shoe
On last, your turnip ticking on its nail!

*"Son it was Death. I have not stirred a foot
Out of this horrible dwelling all these years,
But planted like a nail I have taken root
Under the stairs, my son, under the stairs.*

*"Do not avenge me, Henry. Let all slide.
I grudge your death. See, do not touch the
snake.*

*A cowardice taints you from your father's side
And a coward's lusts, but curb them, for my
sake!*

“Back to your grave, back Father, lest she
wake!”

IV

Two full hours before the dawn,
Dotard Parrot cocks an ear
To the sleeper's moan, long-drawn,
To her slurring tale of fear.

Parrot hears Delilah tell
Who lies dead below the stair;
How he shuddered, stumbled, fell;
In whose cause she laid him there.

The knife bit, thus: thus, the blood spread!
Connoisseur of fo'c'stle speeches
Parrot tilts his bald, sly head,
Learn the spicy yarn she teaches.

Soon, when sunlight warms his cage,
He plots to cheer the passers-by

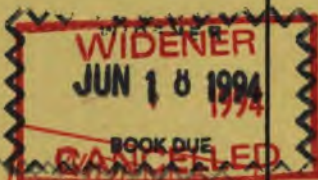
With burlesque of murderous rage,
Acting how his victims die:
Thus, he stabs 'em; there, they lie.

THE END

[63]

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THE PIER-GLASS

POEMS BY
ROBERT GRAVES
